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## USING PROJECTS TO TEACH PROFESSIONAL GERMAN

### ABSTRACT

The article demonstrates the use of projects in the teaching of business German in a third-year college course. First, background information about implementing projects in foreign language instruction will be discussed. Next, concrete examples of how this can be done using the textbook *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* will be provided. Finally, students' reactions to using projects in this course will be supplied.

In our constantly evolving world, globalized markets and societies are advancing and changing at a breathtaking pace. Each society and its customs play an important role in the mosaic of the globalized village. In order to be able to work in this globalized world, it is not enough for students to acquire factual knowledge; they must develop skills that allow them to be flexible and adaptive in new situations and cultures. Our responsibility as language instructors is to assist students in acquiring factual knowledge as well as providing them the opportunity to adapt this knowledge to a new culture. Urzainqui and Costabiei (2002) maintain that adapting knowledge to a new culture is essential for building and maintaining international business relationships (120). The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how we can achieve this goal by using the project method in advanced language instruction. However, before we take a look at this model in Professional German,<sup>1</sup> a review of the project method is necessary.

The project method is nothing new; the Italian Renaissance provides examples of it when wealthy citizens or nobles assigned architects and architecture students so-called *progetti*. Through the centuries various experts (William Rogers, John Dewey) have used different forms of this method in their instruction and writings. John Dewey is credited with the development

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Professional German because many of my students study subjects other than business, e.g., engineering, architecture, and communications.

of the Problem Method of Teaching and the project classroom. His approach primarily consisted of three points: (1) the future is unknown and teachers, therefore, must prepare students to find solutions to problems; (2) democracy is a crucial experience in learning; and (3) “learning is doing” is the key element in using the project method in the classroom (see Gudjons, 2001, 73–76). Dewey (1967) was convinced that every experience is an evolving force that can be judged only on the basis of what it moves toward and into what it evolves. In order for education to be a real benefit to learners, they must have a say in the educational process and in aspects of classroom management. Dewey believes they have this in the project method. The following discussion of the project method demonstrates how we can achieve Dewey’s three points in the language classroom.

#### A WORKING DEFINITION

Frey (1998) defines the project method as “a group of learners working within a certain field of interest.” They plan their own work and carry it out, which results in a tangible product. According to Meyer (1987), good group work transpires if teachers assist students only when the students explicitly request their assistance. Through interacting with learners, teachers, or student peers, serve as facilitators when they assist students in the learning process. One student in my course confirms this outcome by answering the question “Do you think you achieved something from completing this project?”<sup>2</sup> This student replied, “Yes, I got a better understanding of the material and was also able to learn things from other group members.” Gudjons (2001) believes that project learning is “social learning” because participants learn in a group environment through interaction. Another student stated, “All the group members definitely learned a lot about each other. We achieved working together to accomplish a common goal.” Another comment was, “it was an excellent opportunity to gain experience in teamwork and collaboration.”

According to Frey (1998) (see Gudjons 2001; Bastian, 1997; Cowan, 1967, for more characteristics), there are other characteristics to this method that play an integral role:

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of the semester students responded to a questionnaire pertaining to the structure and context of the course. Wherever student responses are appropriate to the discussed material, I will provide these comments. See Appendix for the questionnaire.

- Students take the initiative in the project (e.g., choosing a topic, reporting daily events, researching facts, solving problems).
- They develop the initiative into a reasonable working realm.
- They agree on forms of interaction.
- They set a time-frame in order to meet the project deadline.
- They discuss the goals of the project.
- They develop and agree on the process.
- They understand their role in the project as problem-solvers.
- They agree to an independent flow of information about activities, working conditions, and results.
- They are confronted with real situations and real subjects.
- They deal with current questions that are relevant to them (16).

Some advantages of the method are the acquisition of cooperation skills, team skills, empathy, good research techniques, negotiating skills, creativity, and a sense of responsibility. These advantages provide students with essential, practical, interpersonal, and intercultural experience that will apply to their future professions.

Dewey (1959) maintains that the most vital point of the project method is experience. He states “communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (14). He believes that real-life experience can be more beneficial to human beings than theoretical discourse that has not been practiced, or has no relevance to real life. A student comment to the question “What positive reactions do you have to doing the project in this course?” supports this claim. The student’s answer to the question was “by doing any type of group (hands-on) project, it can help me greatly. I learn much better by applying what I learn in the classroom to a real life situation.” Another student stated that the project provided “real world experience in a pseudo-German real world experience.” Dewey’s intention for using projects was to strengthen the learner’s role in the learning process, which was supported by my teaching experience with this project.

Frey (1998) highlights several disadvantages to the project method. He feels that students learn and acquire much marginal knowledge and do not work enough with the immediate facts (257). However, the structure and implementation of the course will affect whether students use the material covered in class in the project. Frey also believes that this method is not the most economical for quick acquisition of facts and subject matter (260). Moreover, Bastian (1997) maintains that the assessment of student perfor-

mance is often in opposition to the standards of the project method (231); for example, grammar is a major part of the semester grade.

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT METHOD

According to Meyer (1987), it is essential that students understand how the method works and what the instructor expects of each student; therefore, an introduction to the method and a step-by-step explanation of the project is crucial to the successful use of this technique. Once learners are familiar with the project method, the goals of the project, and how they will be evaluated, then work can commence. Frey (1998) suggests breaking up a larger project into a sequence of smaller ones. He believes that by doing so students are better able to deal with the amount of work they are confronted with and are not overwhelmed by the size of the larger project. This technique seemed to appeal to my students; one of them commented, "I liked how over the course of the semester we slowly put it [the project] together and then at the end we had a final portfolio to hand in."

#### THE PROJECT METHOD IN PROFESSIONAL GERMAN

The course in question was a third-year university level Business German course that met three days a week for one semester. The goal of the course was to provide students with the opportunity to set up their own fictitious German business while gaining intercultural knowledge about the German business world. The positive side effect of these objectives was an active learning situation in which the acquisition of a foreign language was a linguistic as well as a social experience. One student confirms this positive effect when s/he states, "The project was easily my favorite part of the course. My partner and I have been meeting together at least once a week for over a month now working on it, and this has greatly improved my speaking abilities because we only speak German when we meet." Another student found collaborating helped to improve other language skills. "I worked well in my group. They helped me learn grammar and expand my vocabulary."

Students' acquisition of Business German was the primary focus of this project; however, the final evaluation was based on students' active involvement and their creativity in the project. One student commented on her/his own evaluation using similar criteria. "You could make the most out of this project depending on how you motivated yourself. It was up to you to attain these objectives." In addition, participants learned appropriate intercultural information relevant to the German workplace. One student stated that s/he benefited from the project by receiving "insight into actual German business

and environments.” This intercultural information played an important role in the establishment of the pretend German company as well as providing students with insight into giving presentations in German. Through the use of in-class presentations, class discussions, and group discussions, students were involved both actively and passively.

The textbook for this course was *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*. In addition, *Der Business Plan*, *Erfolgreich präsentieren*, and *Grundlage der Werbung* were supplemental sources of authentic material that provided students with the opportunity to encounter situations found in the real working world. Moreover, all the texts supplied the participants with situations that they had to analyze for practical business applications and intercultural awareness. Students also had to apply their linguistic skills to appropriate texts in order to demonstrate intentional and communicative awareness.

The material presented and discussed in class provided the basis for the semester project. The sequencing of the material followed the ordering in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* beginning with personnel questions (e.g., job ads and a job interview, selecting personnel for a company) to finally selecting a company type (e.g., AG, GmbH, etc.). In general, the participants learned how a German company is structured, and at the same time they became familiar with the potential German marketplace, which necessitated an awareness of German business culture and potential intercultural pitfalls.

As a part of the project, students completed three writing assignments, one of which was the designing of a job want-ad. Throughout the semester students accumulated all the material covered in class and used it for their company’s business plan, which was due in written form (as the third writing assignment) at the end of the semester. One student stated that s/he “liked how the project incorporated everything we did this semester.” Each group’s business plan served as the basis for the in-class presentation of their company. This in-class presentation was staged as a mock fundraiser for their firm. On the day of their presentation, students submitted their written business plan. By requiring students to hand in a written business plan on the day of their presentation, they were forced to organize their thoughts and goals on paper before presenting them in class.

Before the start of the semester, a decision needed to be made about how to achieve the goals of this course and which method would be the best means of accomplishing them. Regular classroom instruction, together with a project, was one possibility, but a combination of several mini-projects within a larger project seemed to be the most viable choice. By using mini-

projects throughout the semester, students were able to complete parts of the larger project, present them, and receive feedback from peers and the instructor. The use of mini-projects also provided for “free time” working phases for group work during regularly scheduled class time. However, because of the scope of the project, students had to devote time outside of class to working on the mini-projects, as well as the final project. Implementing mini-projects throughout the semester gave students guidance in completing their larger project. Consequently, learners were not intimidated by the scope of the semester project (for most students, this was the first time they had worked on such a project), and they received set dates throughout the semester for completing certain aspects of the final project.

As already stated, the purpose of the project was to create and present a fictive German business in which everyday business situations were the basis for the implementation of intercultural differences between the American and German business worlds. The following considerations were important factors in the development of this project.

- Students had to complete individually two mini-writing assignments and, as a group, a ten-page business plan for their fictive company. The two mini-writing assignments were a job-ad for new employees, and a logo and business card for their German firm. The structure and general content of both the job-ad and the business card can be found in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*. One student commented about the writing assignments, “Doing all the written papers helped in the final project.”
- The creation of a German company provided students the opportunity to be experts within the field of their firm. Therefore, students were more motivated and involved in their own learning. At the same time, they were able to apply knowledge from previous business courses in a new, interesting, and challenging context.
- The results of the semester project were important for the course results; however, the reaction of the students indicated that the results were even more far-reaching. They found that the knowledge gained in the course would be very beneficial to them in their future business endeavors. One student commented, “It [the project] gives us a chance to practice what the majority of us will be doing in the future (leading meetings, introducing a business or idea, etc. in German).”

## IMPLEMENTATION

Previous business knowledge was not necessary in order to complete the semester project. However, all students except one were business majors with a dual major or minor in Business German. As for the German major only, she was able to complete aspects of the semester project requiring less technical knowledge.

Because the majority of students in this course had already had one year of Business German, they were generally familiar with the terminology, topics, and grammatical structures involved. One student commented, “even though we’ve already read through the book once I still learned even more information about German businesses.”<sup>3</sup> Grammar review and exercises played a minor role. Only when it became clear that a certain grammatical point needed to be reviewed and it was relevant to the business context, did we cover it. For example, the Passive Voice, which is typically difficult for English-speaking students to learn, arose when the groups had to compose a help-wanted ad.

The set-up of the course followed the chapter progression in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*, which fell within five major categories: personnel, office organization, marketing, finance, and company structure. The duration for covering each chapter was roughly three weeks. This period of time consisted of in-class discussions of the information from the textbook and supplementary materials, and class time for students to work on their projects as they applied the information discussed in class.

During the first class meeting, students formed their working groups and read “Das Projekt” on pages 245–246 in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*. “Das Projekt” provided students with an overview of what should be included in their Business Plan and questions to answer concerning this plan. Urzainqui and Costabiei (2002) and Rusciollelli (1999) provide a similar list of questions for a Business Plan in order to set up a fictive company. After completing this reading and discussing any questions about it in class, each group decided on which product(s) or service(s) their company would offer, and who their target group (customer) would be. Students could change their

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<sup>3</sup> This textbook was the textbook for our second year Business German course (a two-semester course). However, *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* provided enough material for a good basis in this third-year business course. I also knew that students were not able to complete all the material in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*, or the projects suggested in it, during the first two semesters.



decisions up to the third week of class. Later changes were not allowed in order that the groups complete the final project in a timely manner.

The sequencing of each three-week unit was similar. There was always an introduction; yet, how the introduction was conducted varied depending on the topic of the unit. In the first three-week unit, the introduction was a discussion about how a company decides which requirements are necessary when looking for a new employee. This exercise was based on an exercise from the textbook (see the following section Mini-Project One). This discussion led to information about cross-cultural differences, for example, about age and sex at the German workplace in comparison to the American workplace. This discussion and information are also important for the first mini-project students completed.

To prepare for the second part of this unit, students read the *Kultur-Aspekte* found in Chapter One of *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*. In-class discussions followed. The third section was the in-class group work on the first mini-project for the semester project. The final part of this three-week unit was a short presentation of the results of the mini-project. Students found that oral presentations were good practice for future professional practice. One student commented about the presentations, “I have gained much experience and *confidence* (emphasis added by student) in German presentations, especially these that deal with the business aspects of presentations—something I will have to do in my career.” Urzainqui and Costabiei (2002) believe that such presentations are an excellent opportunity to improve oral skills. This was an excellent opportunity to teach my students about good presentations skills. Sprenger (2004) and Lengenfelder (1996) provide good information about making presentations in German.

#### MINI-PROJECT ONE

**Purpose:** The aim of this mini unit is to provide students with input about the job application process in Germany and review any information they may already know about it.

Unit One in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* deals with this process from the applicant's point of view. Additional sources for the German job application process from the applicant's point of view are Dröll (1996), Friedrich (1995), and Reinker (2004). For a review of intercultural differences between Germany and the United States see Hall and Hall (1990), Stahl et al. (1999), Kiesel and Ulsamer (2000), and Schmidt (2002).

Since the aim of the course is to set up a German company, I told my students that we would look at the job application process from the employer's

perspective. The introduction to this unit was the exercise “Aus Erfahrung” on pages 6–11 in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*. However, I changed the instructions and told my students to select one of the job-ads and then imagine they worked at the personnel office of the company in the job-ad. They had to determine criteria for evaluating perspective job candidates. Because the jobs in these ads were similar in nature we were able, later in our class discussion, to list all the criteria the students found and as well as common criteria from the employer’s point of view for all the jobs. This led to a very good discussion about how employers evaluate and select prospective employees. This discussion was also an excellent opportunity to inform students about cross-cultural differences between Germany and the United States. Two such German examples are age (job applicants older than 40 have little chance of finding a job) and sex (a woman has a much more difficult time finding a job until she is not of childbearing age, and then has problems because of her age). Angelini and Federico (2000), Finger (2001), and Hager (2002) confirm that the job-application process can provide students with good cultural insights regarding the target culture.

Nalepka (2002) maintains that a job-ad can also supply important information about the company advertising for new employees. He points out that there are two different types of job want-ads: the “open” and the anonymous. The “open” ad includes the company’s name and logo while the anonymous one only provides a contact number (*chiffre*). According to Nalepka (2002), a job want-ad belongs to the company’s public presentation and functions as advertising space. He maintains that when a job-ad exceeds a certain size, the ad cannot be viewed only as a job want-ad but also as a general advertisement. Thus, he contends that its purpose is not only to find a new employee but also to construct and maintain an image.

Supplying students with this perspective on the job application process is a valuable tool for evaluating job-ads for future employment. For example, the size of the ad will indicate the importance of the position. However, this information also provides students with valuable input for the upcoming task within this mini-project. In their groups, students decide which employees would be the best for their new German firm. Then students design individual want-ads for this position. It is important to remember to talk to students about the use of formal and informal address in their preparations of the job-ad. Experience has shown that one cannot review the use of *Sie* enough, since English speaking students tend to fall back frequently on the use of *du*.

At the end of the three-week period, each group selects one job-ad from their group to use as the want-ad for their fictive company. The group pre-

sents this ad to the complete class and explains why they set their ad up the way they did and what kind of job candidate they sought. This last point usually stimulates a good class discussion about whether the want-ad will achieve its goal and attract the kind of applicants for which it is intended.

#### MINI-PROJECT TWO

**Purpose:** The aim of this mini-project is to provide students with a chance to conceive and design a form of marketing for their company that is not overwhelming in scope and is achievable within the three-week timeframe used for this unit.

This segment started with a discussion about the advertisement on page 111 in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag* and expanded into a general discussion about the use of advertising. Then we looked at several other ads provided in the textbook. Students completed various exercises in the textbook that dealt with different aspects of an advertisement, such as the headline. We talked about logos used by these companies and the purpose of a logo, such as for business cards.

According to Lengenfelder (1996), the business card is an important means of communication that indicates the most important things about a person, e.g., who we are and what we do. A business card is not only a very important form of general communication, but it is also an important form of cross-cultural communication in the business world. One pertinent example of this is the names of job positions one can have at a company. To the surprise of many German businesspeople, every American seems to be a manager. In the German language, the meaning of manager is an executive, which can lead to confusion. Hager (2002) provides a list of some jobs in German with their English equivalents (p. Ü45) that helps students complete the mini-project.

Students are now ready to work on their mini-project, the designing of a business card for their fictive company. Hager (2002) provides a good introduction to this assignment. In addition to the advice provided in *Deutsch im Berufsalltag*, Lengenfelder (1996) provides a list of tips for designing a business card that nicely supplements the list in Hager (2002). Lengenfelder (1996) suggests, among other things, that the information found on the business card needs to be current. One should not cross out or correct zip codes or telephone numbers on the card; this makes a very unprofessional impression. He also points out that the layout of the card should be clear and well organized. The name of the person on the card has to be easy to read. The company's logo should not be too large, otherwise the other information

is overshadowed by the logo. The lettering should be easy to read and neither too large nor too small. Lengenfelder (1996) maintains if the person on the card has a title, such as PhD, it should be included. This intercultural difference should be a part of a class discussion that highlights some of the cultural differences that could be pitfalls to doing business with Germans successfully. The format of the card should be such that it easily fits into a business card cover or file, which should be used in order to keep business cards clean (pp. 102–103).

At the end of this three-week period, each group selects a business card from the group they would like to use for their company. Students explain to the whole class why this particular business card is good for their company and what effect it should have on their customers.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have reviewed what the project method is, and how to use it in an advanced German Business class. We have also seen that students like doing a semester project and found it to be beneficial for their future professions. One student in a class of nineteen did not like doing the project, but also said that s/he did not like group projects in general. Another student (perhaps the non-business major) commented that the project would not have much application for later life but still felt that the course project went very well.

Question seven in the questionnaire (see Appendix) asked students to score how beneficial they felt the project was. This rating was on a scale from one to five; one was the least and five the most beneficial. The mean for all nineteen students was 4.7. Therefore, I think it is fair to say that students found the project to be beneficial and it helped them learn more German. The project method does fulfill Dewey's basic points (finding solutions to problems, being democratic, and learning by doing) as well as the ten points mentioned by Frey, as my students generally confirm.

One student summarized the project method well in her/his statement "the project was great because it was not only fun and interesting, but it brought everything we learned together."

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## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible.

1. Was your primary reason for taking this course fulfilled? What was the reason?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Did you get from this course what you expected to gain by taking it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What positive reactions do you have to doing the project in this course? What negative ones?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. In your opinion, were the objectives of the course project attained in this course?

5. Do you think you achieved something by completing the project? What is that achievement?

6. If you had the chance to change something about the project, what would that be?

7. On a scale of one to five, one being the worst and five the best, how would you rate this project? Its implementation?